DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 190 EC 304 030

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TITLE Duck! Someone Said, "Inclusion"! Reactions to a Survey.
PUB DATE [8 Jun 95]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; *Inclusive Schools; Mainstreaming; *Parent Attitudes; Rural Education; Student Needs; Student Placement; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Pennsylvania (West)

ABSTRACT

Views of parents and teachers about inclusion of students of all learning abilities in regular education were surveyed in a small western Pennsylvania school district. Information was sought from 54 parents and 28 teachers of students needing learning support, students identified as gifted/talented, and students not identified as needing support or as gifted. Responses were obtained from 33 percent of parents, and 64 percent of teachers. Strong opinions for and against inclusion were expressed. Several teachers felt that the concept of "least restrictive environment" allows for leverage in placing the student. Teachers emphasized the importance of meeting the student's educational needs whether placement results in an excluded environment or the regular classroom. Other issues that were identified included: whether inclusion is detrimental to meeting the needs of all children; whether average children receive a watered-down curriculum due to time spent on adaptations of content; whether students who are gifted are bored by a slow pace; whether some students are held back from accelerating until the whole group masters the material; the idea that "regular" children learn to respect and accept others for who they are regardless of their limitations; and classroom teacher preparation for inclusion. Contains two references. (SW)

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ED 384 190

DUCK! SOMEONE SAID, "INCLUSION"!
REACTIONS TO A SURVEY

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Inclusion. In education this one word can elicit attitudes of frustration, confusion, apathy, and anger. Teachers and parents alike have very strong opinions about the appropriateness of inclusion in today's classroom. In addition, attitudes towards inclusion differ between and among groups. Not all teachers agree on its benefits, problems, and effects; nor do parents. The concept of including all children of all learning abilities seems to be the righteous way to provide a free, appropriate education to everyone. Not everyone, however, is completely satisfied. Opinions are strong both in favor of and against inclusion.

Because inclusion seems to be the sweeping "wave of the future" in education, I decided to survey several parents and teachers to compare their feelings on such a controversial issue. I surveyed a small school district in Western Pennsylvania so that all of the attitudes, although varying, will reflect the same system. I surveyed 18 parents of learning support children, 18 parents of gifted and talented children, and 18 parents of "regular education" children. Twenty eight teachers from one elementary school were also asked to complete the survey including learning support, gifted and talented education (G.A.T.E.), and "regular" classroom teachers. Sixty four percent of the teachers responded while only thirty three percent of all parents responded. Although the response to the questionnaire was less than enthusiastic, the opinions expressed were strong whether in favor of inclusion or not.

In 1975 Public Law 94 - 142 was enacted by the federal legislature. This law, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), assured the right of all children to a public school education. The law incorporated certain convictions: (1) a free appropriate public education, (2) an individualized education program, (3) special education services, (4) related services, and (5) the least restrictive environment in which to learn.(Alexander 1992)

This law is subject to interpretation by parents, teachers, administrators and the courts. Several teachers feel that the words "least restrictive environment" allow for

leverage when placing a child. For some children, the least restrictive environment is the regular classroom. However, another student may need a separate school setting to find success. One intermediate grade learning support teacher of twelve years feels that some students find more success in an excluded environment. Other teachers agree. The consensus is that the educational needs of the child must come first. If a child's needs are successfully met in a "regular" classroom, then the child should be placed in that room. A child who needs more support and only finds support in a smaller environment should also be placed accordingly.

Another phrase which leaves room for interpretation is "appropriate" education. Again, this word allows for leverage in placing a child. An appropriate education for a low functioning, mentally disabled child may be learning necessary life skills while a G.AT.E. student's appropriate education might include advancing several levels for reading. One teacher feels this means allowing a child the opportunity to learn to his or her capacity and that what is appropriate for one child may not be for another. Some children need to learn life skills not grade level science and social studies that is beyond their abilities. A G.A.T.E. teacher sees the idea in another light. Children should be placed academically. This could mean movement both forward and backward as needed to meet the demonstrated needs of a child. If a student reads on a tenth grade level, what is he doing in a sixth grade reading class?

The parents seemed to agree with the teachers that "appropriate" and "least restrictive environment" are the most important words of this law. Two G.A.T.E. student parents agree that schools should allow for acceleration and that each child's potential needs to be recognized. Another parent feels that children should be able to learn at their own speed allowing for acceleration and remediation when necessary. A parent of a learning support is offended that one might think that a learning support child should be placed in one room. They should be treated equally and taught according to their needs. All of the parents surveyed seemed to agree that the needs of the individual must be met.

Many respondents to the survey identified a possible problem when inclusion is implemented. One parent makes a point: "In some instances the rights of the "special" child supersedes the rights of a "regular" child. This brings up the point of meeting the needs of all children. Teachers agree that every effort is given to meet the individual needs of each child. However, inclusion is does not allow the needs of all to be met. Many teachers feel that so much time is spent on adaptations of content for the learning support child that the "regular" students suffer from a watered down version of curriculum. One parent of a downs syndrome child feels that the benefits of meeting social needs are important; several teachers agree. Included children need to see and experience appropriate behavior and language being used. This will help her child to develop such skills more so than a text. However, most responding parents feel that inclusion is detrimental to meeting the needs of all children. Gifted students are bored by the slow pace and few challenges. Average children receive a watered down curriculum and also begin to resent learning support children because of the many adaptations from which they don't benefit. Regular education students see other children doing less work and making equal or better grades. According to several parents, this is a source of frustration for many children.

Who benefits from inclusion? According to many teachers and parents - everybody, socially. "Regular" children learn to respect and accept others for who they are regardless of their limitations. This will be a benefit to future societies because we are fostering tolerance. Educationally, on the other hand, the majority of both parents and teachers feel that inclusion is designed around the higher level learning support child. This is the type of child that best adjusts to new environments and who can also benefit most from the peer tutoring and adaptations made by the teacher. One teacher feels that a parent of a special child (learning support or gifted) who has an advocate group to support and argue on their behalf will benefit most. Some teachers see the biggest benefactors of inclusion as the parents of the learning support children. The parents feel good because

they may view their child as more "normal" because they spend more time with the other children.

Who, then, is hurt by inclusion? Many teachers feel everyone is hurt in one way or another. Students are held back from accelerating until the whole group "gets it". Some parents of regular education children are frustrated by the special attention that learning support children receive while their child struggles. Some content is thinned so much that the learning support students really aren't learning anything of value. In addition, are we teaching what these children need? Does a child with very limited gross motor ability need to participate in shooting a basketball? Is it important for a child with an IQ of 50 to summarize the consequences of World War II? Some teachers state that we are giving learning support students a sense of false reality because we work so hard to have them be successful that they cannot handle failure. One teacher feels, and some parents agree that teachers are also hurt because inclusion makes a difficult job even harder. Much of their time must be devoted to a small group of children while the majority suffers.

The question of proper teacher training was easily the one question that the majority of both teachers and parents answered alike. 94% of the parents and 98% of the teachers feel that classroom teachers are not properly trained for inclusion to be successful. Some teachers find that a student will be included in their class and then are taught to adapt materials to the students needs when it may already be too late. Some teachers have not been trained at all. One teacher offers this view: "There is little to offer in the way of concrete training. Most programs about inclusion dwell on the idealistic, philosophical aspects rather than concrete techniques." Most parents agree that teachers probably aren't trained to use inclusion in their class. However, they view the staff as a group of professionals that are able to adjust their class to meet the needs of the children to the best of their ability. Unfortunately, this still isn't enough to create equality for children of all levels in one room. One teacher , without proper materials, time, funding and support, cannot make inclusion a success for every child.

Although many people have a sour taste for inclusion at this time, the hope is still that inclusion will have a positive effect for our society. As mentioned before, acceptance of differences between people will hopefully be a major benefit for everyone. The self-esteem and social interaction of children who find success in this format will increase. Also, all children learn to work with people of all talents and abilities as well as disabilities.

On the other hand many people fear that the regular education child will not have the experiences he or she might have had if inclusion were not part of their schooling. Are we setting the majority up for failure and not preparing them for the future because of inclusion? Are our standards being lowered to create a successful environment for the minority of students? Some students may think that less effort is acceptable. Are we truly preparing students for the real world? Are all students getting the education they need?

There were many ideas for changes in training, curriculum, and class structure generated from the survey. By far the most popular change would be to create smaller class sizes. Large classes are difficult to instruct without making adaptations for learning support and gifted. More teacher aids to help implement individual education programs would be a huge help to an overworked staff. Time needs to be allotted for classroom teachers to meet with both the gifted and learning support staff to help develop strategies to meet the needs of the included students. Universities need to develop course work that will address inclusion.

In my survey of a small rural school district I found many strong opinions in support and against the use of inclusion. I don't feel anyone included in the questionnaire is completely sure of all of the effects inclusion has in our schools. Research must be done in several years to help determine the successfulness of inclusion. Hopefully, by then, it won't be too late for society.

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